



Briefing:

Great Places – member workshop

Manchester

15 February 2019

Representatives from nearly 30 housing associations from across the North West attended the workshop to discuss the Great Places Commission's interim report and ideas for the Commission's final report in spring 2019.

- the Great Places Commission's findings to date, as summarised in the [Great Places interim report](#)
- ideas for the Commission's final recommendations, due in spring 2019.

1. Introduction

The interim report of the Great Places Commission was published in November 2018. It captures the breadth of insight and evidence the Commission has gathered during 2018 and includes a number of discussion points for further exploration.

From January to March 2019, the Federation is engaging with members and stakeholders to seek feedback on the findings and understand what should be included in the Commission's final recommendations, due in the spring. The three workshops, held in the Midlands and the North in February 2019, are a key part of this member engagement.

This briefing note summarises the discussions that took place during the Manchester workshop on 15 February.

2. Summary

The workshop consisted of facilitated table discussions on the four themes in the interim report: people, places, partners and housing associations. Members welcomed the report's focus on place and the wider role that housing associations play in communities. They recognised that some of the questions raised in the report are fundamental to organisational mission and values, and that many of these conversations are being had by housing association boards across the country.

Participants felt that devolution in Greater Manchester in particular is encouraging greater place-based collaboration and new relationships with other sectors and stakeholders. The challenge is to generate similar outcomes where the unique circumstances of Greater Manchester are not present.

The sections below summarise some of the key points discussed on each table and identify case studies which came to light.

3. People

Key discussion points:

- A people focus – we need to move to an approach that is focused more on 'people' rather than 'buildings', and this needs to be reflected in our priorities, language, activities and the way people experience our organisations. Housing associations are under pressure to measure their performance in terms of property not people, and this disconnect could contribute to a whole range of issues in terms of trust, service delivery and reputation. We need to get better at telling our story, and a focus on people could help us do that.
- Organisational culture – a focus on people needs to be embedded across an organisation and measured properly. Staff need the right skills and flexibility to do this. Housing associations also need to think about how we could design our local plans and offers around a place's 'strengths' rather than just 'needs', which could also require a degree of culture change.
- Engaging with a broad range of residents – not just our own tenants, but other residents who have a stake in a place.
- Use our personal touch – housing associations are uniquely placed in that we have regular contact with our tenants, and we could use this as a means to better tell our story and 'sell' ourselves; we need to ensure this contact is meaningful for tenants. This approach may also

require a degree of organisational culture change, in terms of trusting and empowering our staff, and recognising them as important assets.

- Integrated services approach – we can support community hubs that accommodate a range of services and therefore operate in a citizen-centric way.

Examples:

- Digital skills – Ashton Pioneer Homes is implementing a 100% fibre optic rollout across all of its homes.
- Onward Homes has developed a new tenancy sustainment model based on ABCD principles and Hilary Castle's book, 'Radical Help'. This is the organisation's attempt to embed this approach into its core service.
- Calico works with young residents to connect them to business growth in Burnley. Calico also offered community interest companies initially rent-free premises at a disused community centre – the businesses now provide the income to sustain the building.
- Onward has partnered with a community shop to make better use of its underused office space.

4. Places

Key discussion points:

- Challenging stigma – stigma around place remains an issue and is often driven by external sources, such as the media. For example, a photo of Gorton in Manchester from 2011 is often used to depict poverty in the UK. For many residents, they don't associate with this stigma and we can play a role in amplifying their voices and challenging negative stories.
- Transport – for places in Greater Manchester, poor and inadequate transport links remain a major challenge.
- Government investment – this needs to be rebalanced and should not focus only on places that are already prospering.
- Empty properties – funding should be put in place to allow housing associations to intervene and improve empty properties on a large scale; an example is Tameside Council, which charges three times the council tax for empty properties.
- Apprenticeship Levy – most housing associations in Greater Manchester use this and integrate it into their procurement processes.
- Community assets – housing associations should use their offices and other assets for local community activities and to promote and facilitate local groups and businesses.
- Regeneration – this should be seen as a catalyst for wider improvements and should have resident engagement and choice at its heart.
- Health – we should focus on creating environments that promote healthy behaviours, and think this in the context of our role as landlords and service providers, and our contact with residents.
- Collaboration – there is potential for housing associations to tap into the CSR agendas of other local organisations and address challenges in partnership.
- Devolution – this is driving new place-based approaches and priorities and is a massive opportunity in Greater Manchester; it also emphasises the importance of housing associations being out and talking to other agencies.

Examples:

- The Greater Manchester homelessness social impact bond demonstrates that the sector can deliver on place-based political priorities.
- Unity Housing Associations has run two business centres since 2002, letting office space to local social enterprises and small businesses through an 'easy in easy out' one-year lease, rather than more rigid arrangements that could be a barrier to these organisations.
- Wythenshawe Community Housing Group runs an enterprise centre and rents out space for the council to use as an active lifestyle centre.
- Onward has a detailed approach to neighbourhood categorisation and focus that draws on internal and external data. Areas include – regeneration, core, growth, improvement and these cut across the whole organisation.
- Calico is establishing Neighbourhood Partnerships and Community Plans at local level; these have helped to leverage in more grant funding and a partnership with Sports England.
- Stigma – Burnley struggles with its reputation and with people focusing on riots that happened decades ago.

5. Partners

Key discussion points:

- Voluntary sector – we can establish important links with the voluntary sector, but we also need to recognise when the sector is getting involved beyond our expertise and scope.
- Local authorities – we need to do more with local authorities, particularly with a view to ensuring officers and councillors understand the housing association role and potential.
- Schools and education – from an anchor institution perspective, but also in terms of the clear evidence regarding educational attainment, unemployment/low paid work and weaker local economies.
- Collaboration approach and resources – there is time, effort and commitment needed to create partnerships and make them work. There is also the issue of individual and corporate ego in terms of who leads and gets the recognition. It is therefore important to have honest conversations about the role we can play using the LIFE (Lead, Influence, Follow, Exit) model. We should also recognise that partnerships don't need to just be between organisations, but can also be with groups and associations of residents.
- National government – strategic, well-resourced and long-term interventions are needed, but to achieve this it is necessary to reduce political risk in the medium term, either through cross-party support or devolution.
- Devolution – regeneration needs to be delivered in partnership, and therefore working in devolved areas with combined authorities is a good example to try out new approaches.
- Local Enterprise Partnerships – there currently exists a major disconnect between the sector and LEPs, and there is little awareness of the role or process of the Local Industrial Strategies.
- Local leadership – multi-disciplinary local teams organised around a place can be really effective, but require strong local relationships and leadership.
- Telling our story – there is potential for housing associations to work more effectively with large institutions such as healthcare providers and the university sector, but often our voice is lost and our role not properly understood. The Federation could play a role in improving the understanding of the sector's role and potential to these partners.

Examples:

- Partnerships are central to Greater Manchester’s approach, and the Land Board in Hattersley (Onward) is a good example of a formal governance mechanism encouraging genuine partnership working.
- Private rented sector (PRS) – Calico is buying up empty PRS homes in partnership with the local authority and there are also examples of landlord licencing schemes being used. Housing associations could widen their placemaking and tenancy sustainment activities to all residents in an area (including PRS) to help with genuinely place-based approaches, and PRS landlord buy-in could be achieved through local authority-run landlord licencing schemes, which would also generate the resources for the work. Big Local are interested in this.
- Calico is also doing some work with the Behavioural Insights Team on financial stress interventions.
- Manchester City Council has an [Open Data](#) approach which should support better partnership working.

6. Housing associations

Key discussion points:

- License to operate – the support and permission we as organisations need in order to continue to work and thrive in a place. This links the core needs of our businesses to the wellbeing of the communities in which we operate. Can be easily lost and difficult to gain, but captures well the issues of trust and our role in communities.
- Collaboration – the LIFE (Lead, Influence, Follow, Exit) model is helpful, but it is important to consider instances in which partners may all want to exit.
- Staff volunteering – encouraging this as an organisation can help enhance pride in a place and connect us more to our people.
- Ethical disposals – this needs to be carefully considered in order to achieve the best value. We must also recognise links between an ethical disposals policy, lack of public investment in failing housing markets and the poor sustainability of some neighbourhoods.
- Offer for communities – we need to establish a statement of ambition and commitment to places, which goes beyond our growth ambitions, and is demonstrably real and tangible.
- LIFE model – should be based on areas and non-sector partners too; hard to see how it will work on new build due to the incentives to compete
- Code of Governance review – could there be scope to include some of the behaviours and values discussed here in the Federation’s Code of Governance review, e.g. ‘transparent, accountable and invested in communities’.

Examples:

- Staff volunteering – One Manchester has an interesting model for this.
- Calico in Burnley is experiencing weak demand for some homes but is not disposing of them, due in part to its strong commitment to the area. This demonstrates the need for coordinated and holistic action to improve the wider economy, as this will have a knock-on effect on the housing market.



7. Next steps

The Great Places Commission is meeting on 18 March to discuss feedback on the interim findings from housing associations, civil servants and other partners. The Commission will then get to work on its final recommendations, which are due to be published in spring 2019.

The final recommendations will be an integral part of the Federation's influencing work around the 2019 Comprehensive Spending Review and will contribute to the Federation's new three-year business strategy, due to take effect from April 2019. During 2019/20, the Federation will focus on implementing the Commission's final recommendations and applying the Commission's insights to other relevant topics.

8. Further information

Online: <https://greatplaces.housing.org.uk/>

[Great Places Interim Report, November 2018](#)

[Great Places blog](#)

[Great Places Commission - visits and short films](#)

[Great Places resource library](#)

Twitter: #GreatPlacesCommission

Email: greatplaces@housing.org.uk